STUDY OF JUVENILE WRITINGS OF EIGHT AMERICAN AUTHORS OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY

DOROTHEA BIGNELL MORSE

B.A., Nebraska Wesleyan University, 1926
M.A., State University of Iowa, 1934
B.S. in L.S., University of Denver, 1945

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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
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URBANA, ILLINOIS

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Many books for and about children written in America during the last half of the nineteenth century merit the continued interest of children and adults. *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn,* of course, still retain their charm for many readers and find a wide audience. Louisa May Alcott's series of *Little Women* stories and Hawthorne's tales of mythology as well as his historical sketches were written for and still interest the child reader. But many other books written primarily for children are both attractive and meritorious. Aldrich recalled his own childhood in Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Howells remembered his boyhood in *A Boy's Town* in frontier Ohio; Garland relived the life of the Iowa frontier in *Boy Life on the Prairie;* while Crane at the end of the century made the child the focus of much of his writing.

These books written for and about children reveal, in general, stylistic devices and themes similar to the adult writings of their respective authors. Hawthorne's imagery and color are characteristic of his works for both children and adults; Eggleston is concerned with the same social problems in all his fiction. Garland's story of boys traces in milder form the impact of the frontier shown in *A Son of the Middle Border.* Aldrich uses juvenile adventures and a half-satiric tone in his books for both child and adult readers; Twain comments on life and its perverseness in *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Gilded Age;* Howells employs practically identical materials in *A Boy's Town* and *Years of My Youth,* and in his fiction — notably *A Modern Instance, The Kentons,* and *The Leatherwood God* — borrows from ideas established in his youth. Crane opens the field for later writers who follow in his footsteps when they portray life as the result of psychologically dominant impressions made in childhood.

A literary analysis of these books for and about children shows well-developed child characters through their relationships with other children and with adults. Their value lies especially in adding to American literature the realistically drawn child character little known before 1850. In the child's reactions to other children and in his attitudes toward adults and their society, these writers reveal the small town and its problems and joys. The little women of Miss Alcott's accounts show a representative New England household in a small village. Tom and Huck bare the weaknesses of adults circumscribed by custom and petty fears in a Missouri town as well as the delight of boys in Hannibal and the river. With less gayety and fun, Eggleston depicts a rural district in *The Hoosier Schoolmaster.* Crane pictured the slums of New York, narrowing the scene to a small section. Through the child he showed the stifling and demoralizing influence of both scene and associates upon the impressionable mind of the child. He added the middle-class group in a small town in the *Whilomville Stories.* Through juvenile characters all these writers have revealed children, adults, and the places in which they lived.

The small town formed the background for an intense interest in education. Many of the novelists discussed here wrote to supply material for the child reader and to present the picture of the school system. The country's schools of the second half of the nineteenth century are clearly drawn with very little nostalgia but with many vivid touches. Mark Twain comments on education through the experiences of Tom and Huck; Louisa May Alcott through the education of the March girls; Aldrich through Tom Bailey's fun and troubles in the preparatory school in the seaport town of Portsmouth; Howells through the boy who attended both private and public schools in pre-Civil War Ohio; Garland through his urge to learn despite the drabness of some phases of school life in Iowa; and Eggleston through his condemnation of conditions in *The Hoosier Schoolmaster.* Crane, not mentioning any school or system of education, makes a bitter commentary on

the lack of any leavening effect of the public school in a large city's slum section at the end of the century. In the *Whilomville Stories,* the boys went to school, but Crane offered no particular judgment regarding education within the walls.

There is regional diversity in these works for the reader sees the child at home in New England, in early Ohio, on the western frontier, and in a large city. Different sections of the country reflect varying interests, but the child absorbs whatever is present in the special locale and, in turn, reflects that special influence. Careful analysis of the juvenile writings of the eight American authors selected for this study has convinced the author that many of the books discussed deserve fuller consideration. Not only should they be made more easily available to children, but they should be read by more adults as a valuable revelation of the child mind.

VITA

Dorothea Bignell Morse was born at Morse Bluff, Nebraska, April 16, 1899. She graduated from North Bend High School with honors. In 1926 she received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Nebraska Wesleyan University where she was a member of Phi Kappa Phi and Pi Kappa Delta. She received a Master of Arts degree from the State University of Iowa in 1934 and a Bachelor of Science in Library Science from the University of Denver in 1945. At present she is an assistant professor at the University of Mississippi and is a member of American Association of University Professors and Delta Kappa Gamma.